

Listen

A Seeker's Resource for Spiritual Direction

A P R I L 2 0 1 1

V O L 5 : I S S U E 2

CULTIVATING COMPASSION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

I arrived in Berkeley, California, USA, mid-morning, exhausted. After fifteen hours of travel, every step and breath brought me closer to a bed, and blissful sleep, or so I thought. Standing in the historic Bancroft Hotel, I learned my room would not be ready for several hours. I was early. Looking into my bleary eyes, the manager said, "I'll change your room assignment." We exchanged a smile. Ten minutes later, I contemplated a shower and hours of sleep before walking across the street later that night to the University of California at Berkeley School of Law. Yet actually, I had another decision to make: in two hours, conveniently located in the room beneath mine, an optional "meditation mini-retreat" led by poet and Zen Buddhist priest Zoketsu Norman Fischer would begin. Thus my choice: sleep or meditate. A hot shower was non-negotiable.

A bell rang. *Sit in a dignified position.* That was safe enough—I was nervous in a room with more than one hundred people, some students, others dressed professionally, many who greeted one another with familiarity. For several hours that afternoon, breathing meditation, mindfulness practice, very few words, and walking meditation restored me. Silent connections formed between those of us who would participate in *The Mindful Lawyer*—a conference exploring the integration



Snowy Egret—*Egretta thula*

of meditation and contemplative practices with legal education and the practice of law. The words justice, just this, just is, rippled in my mind.

Throughout the weekend I became more convinced that cultivating an inner life takes courage and appears counter-cultural. This was a new arena for me: 185 lawyers, law professors, students, judges, mediators, and other dispute resolution professionals gathered in a law school lecture hall. Time and again people told how difficult it is to admit to a colleague or client, "I have a meditation practice." The value of being present in the moment is inestimable for an attorney or during conflict mediation. Lawyering takes place in a stressful, competitive environment with high stakes for everyone involved. Justice, activism, and social transformation require intention, presence, and wise action.

Be still, breathe. We were born knowing this fundamental spiritual practice. It is core to our vital life force. Somehow, in the hustle and bustle of achievement,

success, productivity, life commitments, failures, and demands, we dismiss and replace the value of cultivating an inner life with sleep, addictions, stress, apathy, or restlessness. It need not be so—or continue.

You have a choice. I have a choice. We each have the power to make a decision to commit to a contemplative practice. It is essential to cultivate our inner aliveness. This is not an esoteric concept. It is being fully human, and begins with breath, pulse, and a dignified position. A spiritual director or spiritual guide can be an excellent companion during our first steps or when we are well on the journey.

—Pegge Erkeneff Bernecker

SEEDS OF INTEREST:

- Field Notes:
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- Field Guide: *Contemplating Compassion & Justice*
- Poetry: *An Octave Stanza: Daoist Lectio Divina*
- Poetry: *Oseh Shalom*
- Global Resources
Book Review: *Fragments of Your Ancient Name: 365 Glimpses of the Divine for Daily Meditation*
- Ask Owl



CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER BEADS— AN ANCIENT PRACTICE

Something extraordinary happens when the deep heart speaks. It has its own prayers and to practice them is based on an ancient tradition called *Prayer of the Heart*. To combine your prayer of the heart with the visceral touch of beads creates a powerful reminder of intention.

Beads or grooved stones, as a representation of intangible thoughts or feelings, have been used as early as 3,200 BCE as a way to express the ineffable. The early Christian desert mothers and fathers would often use pebbles as a reminder of their prayers. I tried that method and found my pockets becoming increasingly heavy with stones until a Coptic monk shared another component of this prayer with me. I was to drop the pebbles in the sand when my prayers were finished.

Aha! This is contemplative prayer in its purity; to let go of my prayers, until all that remains is the desire to love the Holy One whole heartedly.

Creating prayer of the heart necklaces began ten years ago when I first led pilgrims into the Sinai Desert of Egypt. We would dedicate a day of silence to apply what the fifth century CE Christian desert mothers and fathers prayed in the desert: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me. Because the pilgrims were from various faith traditions, I invited them to let the prayer emerge

from their deep soul. Following this ancient theology, the prayer begins with a call of guidance to a Divine Presence with the desire to live into the highest self for the good of all. It is often a short prayer of about ten words to be repeated with frequency.

You do not need to be in the desert to practice this tradition.

Find a peaceful place. Be still and try not to hold onto any particular thoughts, just accept each without judgment. Let the prayer come from within the depths of your heart and pray itself within you. Write it down as it is. Do not worry if it does not come immediately. Try again another time. Once you have written your prayer of the heart, practice it in your thoughts and actions throughout the day for several weeks. Notice the shift in your awareness and presence.

Many beautiful prayers have come from this practice including the one I use: *Eternal Wisdom, guide me to be present here and now*. The ten beads on my prayer necklace help me to remember when I forget, which is often.

Similar to the desert mothers and fathers who would weave mats from palm leaves as a contemplative practice, I now string beads from around the world. Each prayer necklace is a reminder of our sacred life journey and its connection with a universal movement towards balance and harmony. Symbolic of this ancient wisdom are the two hearts I add to each necklace. They signify the individual journey in relationship with creation, other human beings, and the Great Spirit.

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